Cuneiform writing and power at Yahudu and its environs

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CUNEIFORM WRITING AND POWER AT YĀHŪDU AND ITS ENVIRONS

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2015, the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem hosted an exhibition on the Babylonian Exile entitled "By the Rivers of Babylon"[1]. The core of the exhibition consisted of a group of looted cuneiform tablets from Iraq in the possession of a private collector. The clay tablets were written c. 2,500 years ago in Babylonia, in a village of Judean deportees who had been forcefully removed from their homes by the army of king Nebuchadnezzar II. The village was called Yāhūdu, a reference to the place of origin of its residents. This community is thought to descend from the victims of deportation who are told about in the Hebrew Bible.

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1 F. Vukosavović, *By the Rivers of Babylon: The Story of the Babylonian Exile*, Jerusalem 2015.

Daniel Justel Vicente (ed.), *Judíos en Babilonia. Estudios históricos, teológicos, exegéticos y artísticos*, Colección Typos N.º 2, Ediciones Universidad San Dámaso, Madrid, 2023, pp. 33-57.

The documents trace the fate of this community from a few years after their settlement in Babylonia under Nebuchadnezzar II until several decades after the so-called Edict of Cyrus should have set them free, according to the traditions of the book of Ezra. In the words of the exhibition's curator, Filip Vukosavović[2], the tablets reveal that the captives established 'rich lives' for themselves in Babylonia, an achievement that would have encouraged their descendants to remain in Babylonia, even when some returned to build the Second Temple of Jerusalem.

The academic edition of the privately-owned tablets by Laurie Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, which coincided with the exhibition[3], inspired dozens of lectures, conference panels and workshops and resulted in the publication of many articles, monographs and dissertations. A central theme in this scholarship is the notion, echoed by the curator's words, that the Exile was not as sombre as previously thought[4].

2. A WINDOW ON LIFE IN EXILE?

Many authors writing on the Yāhūdu tablets share the expectation that these artefacts bear direct witness to the historical experiences of displaced Judean persons[5]. The old metaphor of the archive as a window on the past emerges

2 https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/insideisrael/2015/march/by-the-rivers-of-babylon (accessed 22/03/2022).

3 L. E. Pearce and C. Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, Bethesda 2014.

4 E.g. L. E. Pearce, "How Bad Was the Babylonian Exile?", *Biblical Archaeology Review* 42/5 (2016), 49–64; A. Berlejung, "New Life, New Skills, and New Friends in Exile: The Loss and Rise of Capitals of the Judeans in Babylonia", in I. Finkelstein, C. Robin and T. Römer (eds.), *Alphabets, Texts and Artefacts in the Ancient Near East: Studies Presented to Benjamin Sass*, Paris 2016, 12–46; A. Berlejung, "Social Climbing in the Babylonian Exile", in A. Berlejung, A. M. Maeir, and A. Schüle (eds.), *Wandering Arameans*: *Arameans Outside Syria. Textual and Archaeological Perspectives*, Wiesbaden 2017, 101–124). Similarly B. Becking, "Does Exile Equal Suffering? A Fresh Look at Psalm 137", in B. Becking and D. Human (eds.), *Exile and Suffering: A Selection of Papers Read at the 50th Anniversary Meeting of the Old Testament Society of South Africa OTWSA/OTSSA, Pretoria, August 2007*, Leiden 2009, 190: '… the actual fate of the exiled Judaeans was not as harsh and bitter as often has been assumed'. More sobering thoughts are offered by T. E. Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fith Centuries BCE*, Leiden and Boston 2020.

5 The first tablet mentioning the settlement of Yāhūdu was published by Joannès and Lemaire (F. Joannès and A. Lemaire, "Trois tablettes cunéiformes à onomastique ouest-sémitique (collection Sh. Moussaïeff) (Pls. I-II)" *Transeuphratène* 17 (1999), 17–34,

often in Yāhūdu scholarship. The texts are said to offer a 'glimpse', to 'paint a picture', to 'shed new light' and to give 'insight into what it was like to live in exile'[6]. Nevertheless, it is well known that archives shape as much as they depict[7]. Three factors seem to instill confidence in the truth value of these clay tablets. First, the mundane nature of the transactions recorded in the texts lends them an aura of innocent objectivity. Judeans are seen paying taxes, selling fish, and setting up plough teams—activities that hardly seem to require much critical interpretation. Second, the tablets are thought to constitute the private, or personal, archive of one Judean family, an idea that shores up readers' expectations that these records will invite them into the intimacy of these

no. 1). Some texts that, in hindsight, belong to the same archive had been published by the same authors in 1996 (F. Joannès and A. Lemaire, "Contrats babyloniens d'époque achéménide du Bît-Abî-râm avec une épigraphe araméenne," *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie Orientale* 90/1 (1996), 41–60). Early expectations of the historical significance of the texts can be found in L. E. Pearce, "New Evidence for Judeans in Babylonia", in O. Lipschits and M. Oeming (eds.), *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, Winona Lake 2006, 399–411; W. G. Lambert, "A Document from a Community of Exiles in Babylonia", in M. Lubetski (ed.), *New Seals and Inscriptions: Hebrew, Idumean, and Cuneiform*, Sheffield 2007, 201–5; Abraham, "The Reconstruction of Jewish Communities in the Persian Empire", in H. Segev and A. Schor (eds.), *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iran and the Jews*, Tel Aviv 2011, 261-4. A critical voice was raised by Rom-Shiloni in 2017, who concludes her review of the tablets edited by Pearce and Wunsch (*Documents of Judean Exiles*) with the observation that, despite the Yāhūdu tablets compensating 'for the gaps in our information concerning the fate of the deportees', 'the Hebrew Bible compositions' remain invaluable 'as sources for this same period, revealing aspects of life that administrative texts cannot yield' (D. Rom-Shiloni, "The Untold Stories: Al-Yahūdu *and* or *versus* Hebrew Bible Babylonian Compositions", *Die Welt des Orients* 47 (2017), 134).

6 These quotes are from the following publications, resp. L. E. Pearce, ""Judean": A Special Status in Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Babylonia?", in O. Lipschits (ed.), *Judah and the Judeans in the Achaemenid Period: Negotiating Identity in an International Context*, Winona Lake 2011, 267–77 (274) (cf. C. Wunsch, "Glimpses on the Lives of Deportees in Rural Babylonia", in A. Berlejung and M. P. Streck (eds.), *Arameans, Chaldeans and Arabs in Babylonian and Palestine in the First Millennium B.C.*, Wiesbaden 2013, 247); Abraham, "The Reconstruction of Jewish Communities in the Persian Empire", 264; C. Waerzeggers, "Review of Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer by Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch," *Strata* 33 (2015), 179; R. Magdalene and C. Wunsch, "Slavery between Judah and Babylon: The Exilic Experience", in L. Culbertson (ed.), *Slaves and Households in the Near East*, Chicago 2011, 113–34 (114).

7 For reading archives as products of power, that silence oppressed voices and normalize the order of things, see (among many) A. L. Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2 (2002), 87–109; and the literature cited in E. Yale, "Archives and Paperwork", in S. Eliot and J. Rose (eds.), *A Companion to the History of the Book*, Wiley Blackwell [2]2020, 129–42.

ancient lives[8]. Third, because these supposedly 'private' texts were written in the cuneiform script and the Babylonian language, and in keeping with Babylonian legal custom, the very existence of these textual artefacts is seen as proof that the Judeans integrated easily, and on their own volition, in their new environment[9].

Some of these intuitive responses to the Yāhūdu tablets may be questioned. In literate societies—especially where the spread of literacy is unequally distributed, like in Babylonia—writing can be an effective tool of control in the hands of the powerful[10]. Even if it were correct that the Yāhūdu tablets were the personal possession of a Judean family, we would still need to consider the implications of the fact that these documents saw the light of day in a context of extreme power asymmetries. In a community that suffered severely at the hands of the empire, we should approach any cache of texts recorded in the language and script of that same regime with the utmost care, especially if these texts turn out to record debt relationships more than anything else[11]. We need to address the question of how this archive came into being and whose viewpoint it represents. This question forces us to consider the social dynamics of record-production in the colony. In the wake of the archival turn, many voices can be heard calling for a re-consideration of archives as sites of power—sites where power is created and negotiated. One of these calls comes from historian Kathryn Burns who admonishes us to 'tak[e] on our archives anthropologically, as part of our fieldwork'[12]. At Yāhūdu, this invitation arrives with compelling force[13]. Why was cuneiform used in a community that was accustomed to writing alphabetic texts in Hebrew, if not also in Aramaic? This legacy should have allowed Judean captives to benefit from the authority of Aramaic as an

8 This idea circulates widely in Yāhūdu scholarship and is based on the introductory chapter by Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*.

9 See a.o. Abraham, "The Reconstruction of Jewish Communities in the Persian Empire", 264; Pearce, "New Evidence", 402, 408; Pearce, ""Judean": A Special Status", 274; Pearce, "Cuneiform Sources for Judeans in Babylonia", 237.

10 Yale, "Archives and Paperwork", with extensive references to literature in the so-called 'archival turn'.

11 On the predominance of debt records in the archive, see J. Hackl, "Babylonian Scribal Practices in Rural Contexts: A Linguistic Survey of the Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia (CUSAS 28 and BaAr 6)", in A. Berlejung, A. M. Maeir and A. Schüle (eds.), *Wandering Arameans: Arameans Outside Syria. Textual and Archaeological Perspectives*, Wiesbaden 2017, 125–40 (127).

12 K. Burns, *Into the Archive: Writing and Power in Colonial Peru*. Durham and London: 2010, 143. For the ethnographic approach to (colonial) archives, see N. B. Dirks, *Autobiography of an Archive: A Scholar's Passage to India.* New York 2015.

13 The title of this paper is a salutation to Burns' 2010 monograph *Into the Archive: Writing and Power in Colonial Peru.*

emerging *koine* in the Near East, in the same way as this language benefited their fellow Judeans in Elephantine who participated actively in the Aramaic legal traditions of the island. Instead, the Judeans of Yāhūdu saw their transactions (or, transactions involving them) being recorded by outsiders, in a script and language that was, at least in the beginning, alien to them.

3. THE TABLETS FROM YĀHŪDU AND ENVIRONS

The cuneiform tablets from Yāhūdu and its environs were looted in the 1990s at an unknown location in Iraq, (partly) moved out of the country, sold to private collectors, and published piecemeal in academic journals and monographs since 1996. The tablets on show at the "By the Rivers of Babylon" exhibition in 2015 represent one part of this dispersed material. A major new addition to this corpus, primarily from the private collection of M. Schøyen, was made recently by Cornelia Wunsch[14]. How many tablets originally belonged to this ancient archive is not known. So far, 215 texts are known to be, or to have been, held in private ownership. Another 41 tablets intercepted by Iraqi customs and conserved at the Iraq Museum in Baghdad have also been linked to this group by Aminah Fadhil Al-Bayati[15]. Currently, the breakdown of texts according to (known)[16] whereabouts and academic edition is as follows:

14 C. Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon: New Historical Evidence in Cuneiform Sources from Rural Babylonia Primarily from the Schøyen Collection*, Dresden 2022.

15 A. Fadhil Al-Bayati, *The Archive of Zababa-šar-ru-uṣur. Texts from the Iraq Museum*, Dresden 2021.

16 The current whereabouts of many of these artefacts is, in fact, unknown as access to these private collections is regulated through trusted networks of experts, see e.g. the reconstruction of the mechanisms behind the acquisition and publication of the Schøyen collection by Chr. Prescott and J. M. Rasmussen, "Exploring the 'Cozy Cabal of Academics, Dealers and Collectors' through the Schøyen Collection", *Heritage* 3 (2020), 68–97. It is unclear which parts of this extensive collection were recently seized by Norwegian police and which parts remain in the collector's possession (https://www.morgenbladet.no/kultur/2021/09/03/okokrim-med-stor-aksjon-mot-norsk-samler/).

Publication	*Number of tablets* ([17])	*Collection*
Joannès and Lemaire, "Contrats babyloniens"	7 ([18])	Moussaieff collection
Joannès and Lemaire, "Trois tablettes cuneiforms"	3 ([19])	Moussaieff collection
Abraham 2005[20]	1	Moussaieff collection
Abraham 2007[21]	1	Moussaieff collection
Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*	104 ([22])	Sofer collection
Fadhil Al-Bayati, *Archive of Zababa-šarru-uṣur*	41	Iraq Museum
Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon*	98	Schøyen collection
Niederreiter and Wunsch 2023[23]	1	Museums of Art and History, Brussels
Total	256	

Table 1: Cuneiform tablets from Yāhūdu and its environs currently known.

The tablets display texts written in the Babylonian cuneiform script and language, and sometimes feature short Aramaic or Hebrew annotations and other markings in their margins. With few exceptions, they contain legal contracts—such as debt notes, receipts, lease and sale contracts. Lists, accounts and other

17 Note that this figure relates to the total number of tablets; duplicate texts are counted twice.

18 A new edition of one of these tablets is presented by P. Zilberg, L.E. Pearce and M. Jursa, "Zababa-šar-uṣur and the town on the Kabar canal", *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie Orientale* 113 (2019), 165–169.

19 Note that I count tablet no. 3, written in Bīt-rē'i (Camb 00), to the archive.

20 K. Abraham, "West Semitic and Judean Brides in Cuneiform Sources from the Sixth Century BCE", *Archiv für Orientforschun*g 51 (2005), 198–219.

21 K. Abraham, "An Inheritance Division among Judeans in Babylonia from the Early Persian Period", in M. Lubetski (ed.), *New Seals and Inscriptions: Hebrew, Idumean, and Cuneifor*m, Sheffield 2007, 206–21.

22 Duplicate texts C16a and 16b are counted separately.

23 Z. Niederreiter and C. Wunsch, "A Tablet from the Zababa-šarru-uṣur Text Group in the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels", in P. Clancier and J. Monerie (eds.), *L'empreinte des empires au Proche-Orient Ancien: Volume d'Hommage à Francis Joannè*s, Oxford 2023, 278–285.

book-keeping records are not present[24]. In keeping with Babylonian legal custom, the contracts are witnessed, supplied with the name of the scribe, and concluded with the place and date of writing. This allows us to date the archive between Nbk 33 and Xer 09 (572–477 BCE)[25].

'Yāhūdu' refers to one of several localities mentioned as a place of writing in the archive. In the Babylonian language 'Yāhūdu' refers both to the city of Jerusalem and to the kingdom of Judah[26]. The settlement bearing this name in Babylonia was a 'twin town' of the Judean capital; it was named after the place of origin of its inhabitants. Mirrored place names of this kind were a common element of the resettlement schemes run by the Babylonians in the late seventh and early sixth centuries[27]. Spanning nearly a hundred years, from c. fifteen years after the destruction of Jerusalem until the reign of Xerxes, the tablets offer information on how members of this uprooted community survived in their new environment. One family in particular stands out in the tablets written in Yāhūdu: Rapā-Yāma (son of Samak-Yāma) and his wife Yapa-Yāhû, their son Ahīqam, Ahīqam's five sons, and some other relatives[28]. Because of this family's centrality, the Yāhūdu tablets have sometimes been considered the 'archive of Ahīqam', suggesting that it was a private collection of texts comparable to other Babylonian private archives[29]. However, this assumption of private ownership is far from unproblematic, as we will see.

24 Exceptions are C54, an unwitnessed and undated list of expenses, and B43, a memorandum.

25 Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*, 4.

26 (Āl-)Yāhūdu refers to Jerusalem in the Babylonian chronicle ABC 5 rev. 12.

27 For recent discussions of this onomastic practice, see G. Tolini, "From Syria to Babylon and Back: The Neirab Archive", in Stökl and Waerzeggers, *Exile and Return*, 63–6; Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 240, 255. I. Eph'al ("The Western Minorities in Babylonia in the 6th–5th Centuries B.C.: Maintenance and Cohesion", *Orientalia* 47 [1978], 74–90) was the first to draw attention to the scale of twin-town nomenclature and to the cultural and economic implications of the phenomenon. The practice has older antecedents in Mesopotamian history (D. Charpin, "La 'toponymie en miroir' dans le Proche-Orient amorrite", *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie Orientale* 97 [2003], 3–34).

28 Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon*, 18–19 offers a significantly expanded family tree of this family, which includes a branch headed by a brother of Rapā-Yāma as well as the main protagonist of the tablets written in Našar (Ahīqar). See also F. Vukosavović, "The Family Tree of Samak-Yāma from the Āl-Yāhūdu Archive," *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie Orientale* 113 (2019), 159–163,

29 Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*, 7–9; K. Abraham, "Negotiating Marriage in Multicultural Babylonia: An Example from the Judean Community in Āl-Yāhūdu", in J. T. Stökl and C. Waerzeggers (eds.), *Exile and Return: The Babylonian Context*, Berlin 2015, 33–57 (34–5).

Many tablets in the archive were written in other localities than Yāhūdu. Chief among these are Našar and Bīt-Abī-râm[30]. Tablets written in those places feature different sets of protagonists than those from Yāhūdu. At Našar, a Judean man called Ahīqar, perhaps a relative of Ahīqam, was active; at Bīt-Abī-râm a Babylonian state agent called Zababa-šarru-uṣur served as 'manager of the crown prince's estate'. Yāhūdu and Našar each produced roughly the same amount of tablets, whereas Bīt-Abī-râm yielded about twice as many.

Inevitably, the question arises whether all these texts belong together. Despite the lack of provenance, this question has been answered in the affirmative[31]. First, tablets from these various subgroups were traded, and therefore probably unearthed, together. Second, a small number of persons is recorded in several of these places, creating 'bridges' across subgroups[32]. And third, all texts spring from the same geographic and economic framework[33]. They were written in Babylonia's eastern borderland and document transactions in the land-for-service system, a government-initiated project aimed at internally colonising the virgin steppe beyond Nippur[34].

4. THE PLAIN OF NIPPUR IN TRANSFORMATION

The plain of Nippur was a wide stretch of land, reaching from the city of Kish on the eastern edge of Babylon's metropolitan zone, past Nippur and across the Tigris river towards Iran. The northern demarcation of this borderless area can be situated around Kār-Nergal, where Nebuchadnezzar II had his southernmost cross-country wall connected to the Tigris river. Its southern demarcation can be situated near the city of Uruk. If one were to draw a straight line between Babylon and Susa, this space would be cut right through the middle.

In the course of the sixth century this plain underwent major transformations in response to empire. Nebuchadnezzar II unlocked its agrarian poten-

30 Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*, 7–9; Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 104–108; Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon*, 7–8.

31 Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*, 9.

32 The connections between the various subgroups are studied in detail by Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 110–159.

33 Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 111.

34 P. Zilberg ("Lands and Estates around Yāḫūdu and the Geographical Connection to the Murašû Archive," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 54 (2021), 414) locates Yāḫūdu near a number of major canals in the Nippur countryside.

tial by bringing it under state cultivation through a massive re-population program. People from elsewhere in the empire were uprooted, deported and resettled, and given land for their sustenance, against the obligation to serve in the army, provide labour and make payments to the state. In scholarship, this is known as the 'land-for-service' sector[35]. The impact of this policy was far-reaching. In the territory of Judah, where extensive excavations have been conducted, population levels dropped dramatically after the Babylonian wars, even to the extent of the area becoming near-depleted[36]. Other peripheries of the empire, albeit less excavated in modern times, probably suffered similarly[37]. These exploitative actions against subject populations generated tangible benefits for the centre. On the vast plain beyond Nippur, deportees were made into colonists, farmers, labourers, soldiers and tax-paying subjects. In this way, the re-population program brought cultivation to the land, food to the cities, and muscle to the army.

By the time of Nabonidus, one or two generations later, we have to imagine an eastern frontier with a large presence of multiethnic communities, whose farms and canals encrouched on formerly pastoral land. The effect of the process of 'internal colonisation' is visible in the grid-like organisation of the landscape behind Nippur[38]. Surveys conducted in the mid-20th century revealed

35 G. van Driel, *Elusive Silver. In Search of a Role for a Market in an Agrarian Environment. Aspects of Mesopotamia's Society,* Leiden 2002, 226–273; Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 108–110.

36 A. Faust, "Deportation and Demography in Sixth-Century B.C.E. Judah", in B. E. Kelle et al. (eds.), *Interpreting Exile: Interdisciplinary Studies of Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts*, Atlanta 2011, 91–103; A. Faust, *Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period: The Archaeology of Desolation*, Atlanta 2012; O. Lipschits, "Shedding New Light on the Dark Years of the "Exilic Period": New Studies, Further Elucidation, and Some Questions Regarding the Archaeology of Judah as an "Empty Land", in Kelle et al., *Interpreting Exile*, 57–90.

37 For Moab, see M. Steiner, "Moab during the Iron Age II Period", in M. Steiner and A. E. Killebrew (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant: c. 8000–332 BCE*, Oxford 2014, 770–781; for Jordan, B. W. Porter, "Moving Beyond King Mesha: A Social Archaeology of Iron Age Jordan", in A. Yasur-Landau, E. H. Cline and Y. M. Rowan (eds.), *The Social Archaeology of the Levant from Prehistory to the Present*, Cambridge 2019, 333.

38 The transformation of the borderland was described as a 'project of internal colonization' by A. L. Oppenheim ("The Babylonian Evidence of Achaemenian Rule in Mesopotamia", in I. Gershevitch [ed.], *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Cambridge 1985, 577, 580). Note that he wrote at a time when many states, from Holland and Sweden to the USSR, had been pursuing large-scale projects of internal colonization that turned 'the rural world [into] a site of social and economic planning' (L. van de Grift, "Introduction: Theories and Practices of Internal Colonization: The Cultivation of Lands and People in the Age of Modern Territoriality", *International Journal for History, Culture and*

the existence of parallel canals, transversed at regular intervals by secondary canals. The regular organisation of space has been interpreted as a sign of 'government-sponsored development'[39]. Grids of canals did not only serve an agricultural purpose but also an administrative purpose, as canals delineated districts[40].

An additional benefit for the state might have been the undermining of the pastoral lifeways and alliances of indigenous tribes. The land where newly deported communities like the Judeans were settled may have been virgin land in agricultural terms, but it had supported the pastoral lifestyles of Aramaic communities. We thus have to reckon with multiple displacements happening at the same time: those of deportees turned into colonists and those of indigenous pastoral groups driven away from their homeland of many centuries[41].

Under the Persians, the geopolitical importance of the area changed dramatically again. The backcountry of Nippur now became a corridor in the heartland of the new empire, between Babylon and the Iranian capitals of Susa and Persepolis. A network of royal roads and canals was rolled out to allow easy movement of people and goods across the plain in both directions[42]. The multi-ethnic agro-military colonies, once stationed on the edge of the (Babylonian) empire, now found themselves positioned at the centre of the Persian empire. With increased centrality came the need to improve the management of these communities and their resources. The empire answered to this need in at least two ways. First, it formalized the legal status of these displaced communities to one of permanent servitude (*šušānûtu*). This legal status created unity among the multi-ethnic population of the imperial corridor, by encapsulating all these people into the same category of subjects. Second, the introduction of *šušānûtu* as a tool to manage people went hand in hand with an effort to make the management of farmlands more efficient by combining them in collective units

Modernity 3/2 [2015], 141). While these modernist schemes are a far cry from what was happening in the plain of Nippur in the sixth century, there are some similarities as well, such as the planned nature of the state's intervention in a marginal area driven by its wish not only to improve agricultural productivity but also to (re)design population groups.

39 M. W. Stolper, *Entrepreneurs and Empire. The Murašû Archive, the Murašû Firm, and Persian Rule in Babylonia*. Istanbul 1985, 37.

40 Stolper, *Entrepreneurs and Empire*, 37 n. 1.

41 K. Brown (*A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland*, Cambridge 2003, 173–91) describes similar dynamics on the plains of Kazachstan in mid-20 century USSR.

42 G. Tolini, *La Babylonie et l'Iran: Les relations d'une province avec le coeur de l'empire achéménide (539-331 avant notre ère).* Diss. Université Paris I - Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2011.

placed under a rent-farm system. It could be argued that the controlled return of groups of deportees to their homelands in the early Persian period also featured in this overall effort to exploit their productivity and loyalty for the empire[43].

5. WRITING AT YĀHŪDU

Ever since the first tablets from Yāhūdu came to light, it has struck readers as significant that the colonists had their records written on clay tablets, in cuneiform script and in the Babylonian language. The use of Babylonian literacy at the colony has mostly been seen as a sign of the colonists' acculturation and integration in Babylonian society. Pearce, for instance, talks about Judean 'adaptation' to the Babylonian milieu, whereas Magdalene and Wunsch state that the Judeans were 'readily integrated' and that they pro-actively endorsed Babylonian legal forms[44]. Abraham pondered the possibility that the Judeans strategically adopted the cuneiform writing system because it 'facilitated recourse to Babylonian jurisdiction in the future'[45]. These and other authors assume a voluntary engagement with archival literacy in the colony. They also assess the relationship between community and scribe in commercial terms[46]. Scribes are imagined as travelling professionals who scored the illiterate countryside in search of paying clients. They would have found their customers among 'social climbers' who were able to pull themselves up from their bootstraps by taking risks and acting upon opportunities[47]. There is an uneasy dissonance between such positive appraisals of Judean agency in the archive and the historical reality of Judean dispossession and displacement[48]. Most of the tablets relate to debt administration of some kind, and ultimately, it was the state who claimed labour, resources and payments from this community.

43 R. Zadok, "The restricted repatriation of the Judeans", N.A.B.U. 2018/31.

44 Pearce, ""Judean": A Special Status", 274; Magdalene and Wunsch, "Slavery between Judah and Babylon", 114. Similarly, D. Bodi, "The Mesopotamian Context of Ezekiel", in C. Carvalho (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ezekiel*, 2020, 12, online publication: DOI 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190634513.013.1 (accessed 23/03/2022).

45 Abraham, "Negotiating Marriage in Multicultural Babylonia", 35.

46 Berlejung, "New Life, New Skills, and New Friends in Exile", 26, 33; Y. Bloch, *Alphabet Scribes in the Land of Cuneiform: Sēpiru Professionals in Mesopotamia in the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid Periods*, Piscataway 2018, 340–1.

47 Berlejung, "Social Climbing in the Babylonian Exile".

48 Rom-Shiloni, "The Untold Stories".

5.1. WHO WROTE?

If we look at the social dynamics of writing documented in the archive, it strikes me as highly significant that writing was an activity from which Judean men were excluded[49]. Judeans acted in multiple ways that can be understood as emancipatory, at least in theory, but writing does not feature among these activities. Judeans can be seen pledging a slave, dividing their inheritance, extending or taking out loans, etc., but they never wrote a cuneiform tablet. Why not? Was it because, being Judean, they did not know how to draft a cuneiform tablet and therefore had to rely on Babylonian scribes to write on their behalf? If the initiative for writing indeed lay with the Judeans, their choice of the cuneiform system is rather puzzling. Their own textual culture would have made the alphabetic Northwest Semitic script more attractive, especially given that Aramaic was already a recognised medium in the realm of contract law in the Neo-Babylonian empire[50]. The so-called "Starcky tablet" proves this beyond doubt. This clay tablet records a debt notice redacted in Aramaic language and script using terminology and phrases closely following the Babylonian legal conventions of the time of Nebuchadnezzar, e.g. it is dated, witnessed and closed off with the name of the scribe[51]. Moreover, there is indirect evidence that Aramaic was accepted and used as a language in Babylonian courts[52].

The exclusion of Judeans from the practice of writing was persistent. In a hundred years of recorded history, not a single member of the Judean community drafted a tablet for himself, for his family, or for one of his fellow Judeans[53].

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49 Waerzeggers, "Review of Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites", 186–7.

50 Note that Yigal Bloch assumes that the Judeans used the services of both cuneiform and alphabet scribes, apparently at will: 'Some residents of Āl-Yāḫūdu had their deeds drawn in cuneiform by cuneiform scribes. Others, probably more numerous, employed *sēpiru* professionals to draw their deeds in the Northwest Semitic alphabet, in Aramaic (or perhaps in Hebrew), on sheets o parchment or papyrus' (Bloch, *Alphabet Scribes in the Land of Cuneiform*, 340–1). There is, however, no evidence that two parallel archival traditions existed in Yāhūdu.

51 J. Starcky, "Une tablette araméenne de l'an 34 de Nabuchodonosor (AO 21.063)", *Syria* 37 (1960), 99–115; according to A. Lemaire (*Nouvelles tablettes araméennes*, Genève 2001, 64–8, no. 6A) the tablet records a slave sale rather than a loan. The tablet's provenance is unknown; Starcky suggested Sfire near Aleppo, with a question mark ("Une tablette araméenne", 99), but C. Müller-Kessle ("Eine aramäische 'Visitenkarte'. Eine spätbabylonische Tontafel aus Babylon", *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft zu Berlin* 130, 1998, 190) considered Babylonia proper a more likely provenance.

52 F. Joannès, "Diversité ethnique et culturelle en Babylonie récente", in P. Briant and M. Chauveau (eds.), *Organisation des pouvoirs et contacts culturels dans les pays de l'empire achéménide*, Paris 2009, 219, 222, 227–9.

53 Judeans did not 'write legal documents' as claimed by S. E. Holtz ("Preliminary

Rather than offering a path towards emancipation, the practice of writing created enduring differences between the colonists and the host society[54].

Urban Babylonian communities, by contrast, were largely autonomous in matters of writing. Most Babylonians who curated archives were capable of reading and writing. They often wrote their own tablets or relied on relatives, colleagues or other social peers to write for them[55]. In those archives, it is not uncommon to encounter a person, who is known as a scribe in one text, in an altogether different capacity in another text, for instance as witness, creditor, seller, etc. At Yāhūdu, scribes only interacted with the colonists through writing; they never appear in any other capacity[56]. To put it in other words, there was a complete separation between clients and scribes. Hence, quite contrary to the *communis opinio*, which sees cuneifrom writing at Yāhūdu as a sign of social integration, I would argue the opposite: writing was an activity of systematic social exclusion[57]. This did not only affect the residents of Yāhūdu proper, but also those living in other villages occasionally mentioned in the texts, including at the estate of Našar. Literacy thus created, and maintained over many generations, a structural difference between the (descendants of) deportees and those Babylonian men who came in to record their affairs.

It is instructive to compare the lack of access to archival writing in Yāhūdu with the situation that prevailed in the community of Judean military colonists at Elephantine in the fifth century BC. Among the Aramaic legal documents and letters

Observations on Trial Procedure in the Al-Yaḫūdu Texts", in A. J. Koller et al. [eds.], *Semitic, Biblical and Jewish Studies in Honor of Richard C. Steiner*, Jerusalem 2020, 35*) in passing. Note that Pearce and Wunsch (*Documents of Judean Exiles*, 305–6), in their overview of attested scribes in the archive, list two names that might suggest a non-Babylonian origin but both entries are mistaken as the listed men do not appear as scribes in the relevant tablets (Waerzeggers, "Review of Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites", 191). On the exclusive Babylonian background of the scribes, see now also Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon*, 123.

54 Waerzeggers, "Review of Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites", 186–7.

55 M. Jursa, "Cuneiform Writing in Neo-Babylonian Temple Communities", in K. Radner and E. Robson (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, Oxford 2011, 191; and H. D. Baker, "Record-Keeping Practices as Revealed by the Neo-Babylonian Private Archival Documents", in M. Brosius (ed.), *Ancient Archives and Archival Traditions: Concepts of Record-Keeping in the Ancient World*, Oxford 2003, 243 n. 10 with literature.

56 There are two exceptions to my knowledge. B41 is a receipt recording the payment of house rent by the scribe Niqūdu. Note that this tablet does not record an instance of the scribe's interaction with clients; it rather constitutes a 'personal' record of Niqūdu that was added to the archive, presumably by Niqūdu himself. The second case is recorded in Āl-šarri where three-time scribe Bēl-lē'i appears as debtor (C51).

57 Waerzeggers, "Review of Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites", 186–7.

found on the island are reported two private archives of Judean families[58]. The texts of these archives were written by Judean as well as non-Judean scribes who were firmly embedded in the social networks of their clients: several of them appear multiple times in these archives, as witnesses and occasionally as contracting party as well[59]. In other words, we encounter at Elephantine a Judean community that practiced archival writing as an activity *inter pares*, among equals[60]. The autonomy awarded to this mercenary community in documenting their own affairs stands in sharp contrast to the monopoly of writing that Babylonian men enjoyed at Yāhūdu. It is unclear how this contrast needs to be explained. Perhaps the two communities—one consisting of mercenary soldiers in an urbanised island community on the imperial border and the other consisting of agro-military deportee-settlers near the imperial heartland—were granted different levels of autonomy in drafting their own legal records[61]. It is also possible that cuneiform education was inaccessible to those residing in the remote settlement of Yāhūdu.

5.2. TWO SCRIBES

In how far the relationship between scribe and client was infused with power, becomes clear when we investigate the careers of two better-documented scribes. Arad-Gula is responsible for the creation of 44 documents in the archive (Cyr 03–Dar 04)[62]. He was active mostly in Bīt-Našar, where his office was located, but he also worked in other locations, including in Babylon. The texts that he composed for the archive are all legal contracts, mostly in the sphere of credit extension. As witnessed transactions between individuals, these tablets appear to be private in nature. Yet Arad-Gula's role entailed more than providing notarial service to private individuals. This transpires from the unexpected course that his career took during the succession crisis after Cambyses's death. As long as the area was controlled by the Per-

58 B. Porten, *Archives from Elephantine. The Life an Ancient Jewish Military Colony*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1968, 191–4.

59 E. Cussini, "The Career of Some Elephantine and Murašû Scribes and Witnesses", in A. F. Botta (ed.), *In the Shadow of Bezalel: Aramaic, Biblical, and Ancient Near Eastern in Honor of Bezalel Porten*, Leiden 2013, 49–52.

60 J.D. Moore, "Judeans in Elephantine and Babylonia: A Case Study on Rights and Tenancy Status", ZAW 132/1 (2020), 40–56 (41) comments in passing on the differences in literacy between the Judean communities in Elephantine and Babylonia.

61 On the mercenary origin of the garrison at Elephantine, see recently K. van der Toorn, *Becoming Diaspora Jews: Behind the Story of Elephantine*, Yale 2019, 89–95. James Moore points out that despite the two communities belonging to different milieux, they occupied structurally similar positions in the Achaemenid Empire's system of land tenancy, "Judeans in Elephantine and Babylonia", 41, 55.

62 Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon*, 129–30 and 463.

sians, Arad-Gula was in office. But when allegiance switched to the Babylonian rebel Nebuchadnezzar IV, his job was taken over by another scribe, only to revert back to him when Darius got back in the saddle some months later. This shows that Arad-Gula's position as a scribe was part of the exercise of power in the area[63]. As argued by Alstola, the estate of Našar functioned as a collection point of commodities that were produced in the environs. Arad-Gula did 'not only wr[i]te documents ... but actually supervised his clients' activities'[64].

A similar conclusion can be drawn for other scribes in the archive. For instance, Šamaš-ēreš, one of the prolific scribes at Yāhūdu, wrote texts recording the rents due from Judeans to the army. At the beginning of his career, these rents were due to the Deputy of the Mares (C14–15–17–18–22, B6–12; dated between Dar 04 and Dar 12), later on they were due to another army official, the Chief of the Reserve Troops (C24, dated to Dar 14). Even though he is nowhere explicitly described as a state official, Alstola considers him 'evidently a member of the local administration in the land-for-service sector'[65], because he was a (literate) member of the harvest assessment committee that came into Yāhūdu to inspect the fields, establish the rent, and write down a tangible record of who owed what—all information that was of interest to the military officer.

5.3. SCRIBES AS 'BRIDGES' BETWEEN TEXT CLUSTERS

The Yāhūdu archive defies classification along the familiar models developed for Babylonian archives. Whereas Pearce and Wunsch regard the archive as essentially 'private' in nature[66], Alstola suggests that it is rather 'administrative'[67]. Pearce and Wunsch divided the corpus in three sub-groups, 'loosely connected through a few faint links'[68], while Alstola divided it in nine sub-groups[69], a reconstruction that, in turn, is open to further modification and adaptation depending on each (modern) reader's insights. In my own understanding, we can distinguish the following clusters and sub-groups.

63 Waerzeggers, "Review of Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites", 187.
64 Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 125.
65 Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 145.
66 Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*, 7–9.
67 Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 154-9.
68 Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*, 9.
69 Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 110-54.

	Date	*Description*
Set 1	Nbk 33 – Nbn 9	Debts of colonists living in and around Yāhūdu
Set 2	Nbn 7 – Cyr 4	Partnerships near Hamath and environs
Set 3	Cyr 1 – Dar I 7	Transactions recorded at the estate in Našar
Subset 3a	Cyr 1 – Cyr 7	Tablets written at the estate in Našar about affairs taking place at Yāhūdu
Subset 3b	Cyr 6 – Nbk IV	The new bowlands of 'Kingstown'
Set 4	Dar I 04 – Xer 07	Administration of rent farms at Yāhūdu
Set 5	Cyr 01 – Xer 05	Crown prince's estate at Bīt-Abī-râm

As can be seen from this table, the stratigraphic structure of the archive consists of several superimposed layers[70]. This stratigraphy reveals the existence of two parallel 'stacks' of texts in the archive. The first stack, reaching furthest back in time, is made up of four layers (set 1-2-3-4). Each of these four layers has its distinctive profile, relating to different localities, persons and transaction types. In Wunsch's classification system these layers comprise both 'group one' (focusing on Yāhūdu) and 'group two' (focusing on Našar)[71]. The second stack of texts consists of a single large file that matches the first stack in size and runs partly parallel to it in time. This is the dossier pertaining to Bīt-Abī-râm and the manager of the crown prince's estate, Zababa-šarru-uṣur (set 5).

A possible explanation for the diffuse focus of the archive can be sought in the underlying scribal practices. Whereas in most Babylonian archives the (legal) protagonist is the entity driving the accumulation of texts, in the case of the Yāhūdu archive scribes play a structural role. Their configurative function manifests itself in two ways. First, scribes are among the most prolific individuals recorded in the texts (see n. 81 below). Second, scribes are not only numerically, but also structurally, significant in the archive. Between the main dossiers, scribes function as connecting figures. Arad-Gula wrote almost all the tablets in set 3, and then provided the connection with set 4 by writing its first tablet too[72].

70 See also Alstola (*Judeans in Babylonia*, 155–6) on the layered structure of the archive.

71 Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon*, 7–8.

72 Waerzeggers, "Review of Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites", 187; and Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 123–4, 156.

5.4. SCRIBES AS ESCORTS

The scribes who produced the Yāhūdu archive had another function that can be understood in terms of control: escorting Judeans when they traveled outside the immediate vicinity of Yāhūdu.

Once settled on the plain of Nippur and charged with their obligations, the colonists seem to have experienced little surveillance or physical constraint. From the very first texts contained in the archive, Judeans can be seen moving about the wider Yāhūdu area with apparent ease. This mobility accounts for the large number of place names recorded in the archive. But when they traveled further away[73], and especially to the metropole of Babylon, they did not go without supervision. Whenever the archive situates one of Yāhūdu's residents in that city, a scribe can be seen to have followed him from the borderland. In the third year of Cyrus's reign, the scribe Nabû-ēṭir son of Niqūdu accompanied Ahimmê son of Rēmūtu in Babylon (C61). This same scribe had written tablets for Ahimmê's father in a village located in the environs of Yāhūdu some years earlier (C57, 58). In the fourth year of Darius' I reign, we encounter Ahīqam in Babylon in the company of a scribe who came along with him from back 'home' (B5). The accompanying scribe was the prolific Arad-Gula whom we met before as 'bridge' between the archival layers[74]. Later, in Darius's mid-reign, Ahīqam's heirs had the inheritance document about their father's brewery drafted in Babylon[75]. They were accompanied on this trip by a sizeable group of Judean compatriots, as well as by a scribe of whom there is some evidence to suggest that he too had joined the Judeans from their countryside location[76].

The figure of the escort-scribe can be explained in various ways. It is possible that the Judeans simply asked these men to come along to

73 Their mobility increased in the Persian period, when we encounter members of the Yāhūdu community for the very first time in the city of Babylon instead of only in rural villages. It is striking that Babylon's gates opened up to them almost immediately upon Nabonidus's defeat (C61; Cyr 03). Had the colonists been actively kept out from the city under the Babylonian dynasty? Or is this merely an accidental effect of patchy sources? Gauthier Tolini observes a similar widening of horizons for the Neirabeans around the same time, which would suggest that it is more than coincidence ("From Syria to Babylon and Back", 87–9).

74 See also Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon*, 127 on Arad-Gula's appearance in Babylon.

75 There are two copies of the inheritance document in the archive, C45 and Abraham, "An Inheritance Division".

76 The scribe, Ša-Marduk-ul-inni, probably re-occurs under the shorter name Marduk-ul-inni in the village of Kār-Adad in the dossier from Bīt-Abī-râm (B79). See on this scribe now also Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon*, 127–128.

Babylon—e.g. in order to serve as guides, translators and scribes—but it is not necessarily on Judean initiative that scribes were engaged as escorts. Given that Judeans were dependents of the state, it is not unlikely that they required official approval to go on these trips. As we have seen, most scribes active in the borderland, and certainly the more prolific ones like Arad-Gula, were associated with the state. These men were ideally positioned as guardians: they were acquainted with the colonists; they knew their superiors; and they were trained to keep track of events in writing or by memory.

5.5. RECRUITMENT OF SCRIBES

The scribes who produced tablets in this archive all bear Babylonian names, patronymics, and (often) family names. This onomastic information indicates that they were members of the native population, oftentimes hailing from the urban elite[77]. How or why they came to live or work in the backcountry of Nippur is not immediately evident. In the case of Arad-Gula, it seems reasonably certain that he was stationed in Našar by official appointment. His temporary dismissal during the short-lived revolt of Nebuchadnezzar IV indicates that the office where he worked stood under state supervision (see above). Šamaš-ēreš was involved in rent assessment procedures that were meant to finance the office of an army official. He, too, was probably present in Yāhūdu in an official capacity. Another pattern that tells us something about scribal authority in this environment is the repeated association between certain scribes and particular villages. We assume that scribes were assigned certain villages (and their associated lands) to administer, sometimes in teams[78]. All these indications suggest

77 On the scribes who wrote the Yāhūdu tablets, see Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 121-125; Hackl, "Babylonian Scribal Practices in Rural Contexts"; Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon*, 123–134.

78 Nabû-na'id (alias Nabû-nāṣir) son of Nabû-zēru-iqīša wrote four tablets in Yāhūdu in set 1 (C1, 3, 4, 10). At the same time, Šumu-uṣur son of Ṣillāya was active in Yāhūdu and its environs (C8, 7). In set 2, Marduk-šumu-uṣur of the Dābibī family drafted two records in the twin town of Hamath (C55, 56); Nabû-ēṭir son of Niqūdu wrote two tablets in Bīt-Dibušiti and one in Babylon (C57, 58, 61); and Rēmūt-Bēl (alias Rēmūtu) son of Nabû-zēru-ibni wrote two tablets in Bāb-ṣubbāti (B18, 22). In set 3, the tours of duty of Niqūdu of the Aškāpu family and of Arad-Gula of the Amēl-Ea family at the estate of Našar overlapped, they even wrote partly the same tablets (C98 and C99): Niqūdu was active in Cyr 01, Cyr 07, Camb 05 and Dar 07 whereas Arad-Gula was present for longer stretches of time (from Cyr 03 to Camb 05 and from Bard 00 to Dar 05; see for Arad-Gula as a 'scribe-in-residence' at Našar, Alstola, *Judeans in Babylonia*, 121–125 and Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon*, 129-130). Bēl-lē'i of the Ša-nāšišu family wrote three out of six tablets from Āl-šarri (C48, 49, 50). In set 4, Šamaš-ēreš of the Mudammiq-Adad family wrote eight

that scribes should be seen as part of the state's presence in the area. The details and modalities of their appointments remain unclear.

We find some clues about their professional training in the very texts that they wrote. Johannes Hackl noticed that the Yāhūdu tablets display a high degree of scribal ideosyncracies, including errors of orthography, unusual syntax, and creative or unidiomatic sign use. The poor redaction of the tablets led Hackl to conlude that 'many, if not the majority, of the scribes … had difficulties with the 'classical' language of Babylonian legal records'[79]. Features of their spoken Babylonian language slipped through because they did not adequately grasp the intricate textual conventions. The sub-standard quality of their work is indicative of a low level of scribal training. In the cities, where clients and scribes often shared the same levels of literacy, the standard of work was higher. Scribes working in Yāhūdu and its environs had perhaps been trained in a fast track, leading to a quick posting in the borderland.

A last point that needs to be addressed is the penetration of scribal infrastructure in the environs of Yāhūdu. The fact that a large percentage of tablets were written by a small number of scribes indicates that relatively few scribes were present in these areas. In urban settings the incidence of recurring scribes is much lower. For instance, in the Bēl-rēmanni archive from Sippar, the two most prolific scribes (besides Bēl-rēmanni himself), Lâbâši and his father Nergal-ēṭir, produced less than 5% of the total number of texts[80]. Of the Yāhūdu archive, Arad-Gula and Nabû-ittannu wrote more than 30% of texts[81].

tablets in Yāhūdu and environs between Dar 05–14 (C14, 15, 18, 22, 24, B12, 11, B6 // C17), afterwards, Iddin-Bēl of the Dābibī family wrote eight tablets at Yāhūdu in Dar 14 and 15 (C25, 29, 30, 35, 36, 43, 44; B10). Enlil-iqīša son of Arad-Ninurta wrote three tablets in Āl-šarri and Yāhūdu (C41, 40, 31). In set 5, 38 texts were produced by a certain Nabû-ittannu of the Dēkû family and twelve by one Bēl-kāṣir of the Amēl-Ea family, whom Wunsch suspects might be a relative of Arad-Gula stationed in Našar (*Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon*, 130).

79 Hackl, "Babylonian Scribal Practices in Rural Contexts", 136.

80 Together, they wrote 7 tablets of a total of 153 texts (M. Jursa, *Das Archiv des Bēl-rēmanni*. Leiden 1999). Note that Bēl-rēmanni, with 9 texts written by himself, was the most prolific scribe of his own archive.

81 Based on the prosopographical index provided by Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon*, Arad-Gula wrote 44 tablets and Nabû-ittannu 38 texts, together making up c. 32% of the (presently known) total of 256 tablets in the archive.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Scribes played an important role in the genesis of the archive, and not only because they were the persons who literally produced it, by fashioning lumps of clay into tablets and inscribing them, sign after sign, with legally binding contracts. The story of the Yāhūdu archive has often been told as a narrative of Judean families coming to terms with their captivity and making the best of it. This narrative feeds on the idea that the tablets are the personal property of enterprising Judean individuals who lived in the village. However, caution is urged in light of the dominance of Babylonian scribes, of whom at least the most prolific ones can be affiliated to institutions that had every intention of controlling the productivity of the Judean farms. These scribes were not only writers but makers of the archive. Their intervention rendered the ties between the deportee community and the state 'archivable'—hence, traceable—in the shape of legal contracts.

Abbreviations

ABC text editions in A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, Locust Valley, NY 1975.

B text editions published by Wunsch, *Judaeans by the Waters of Babylon.*

C text editions in Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*.

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